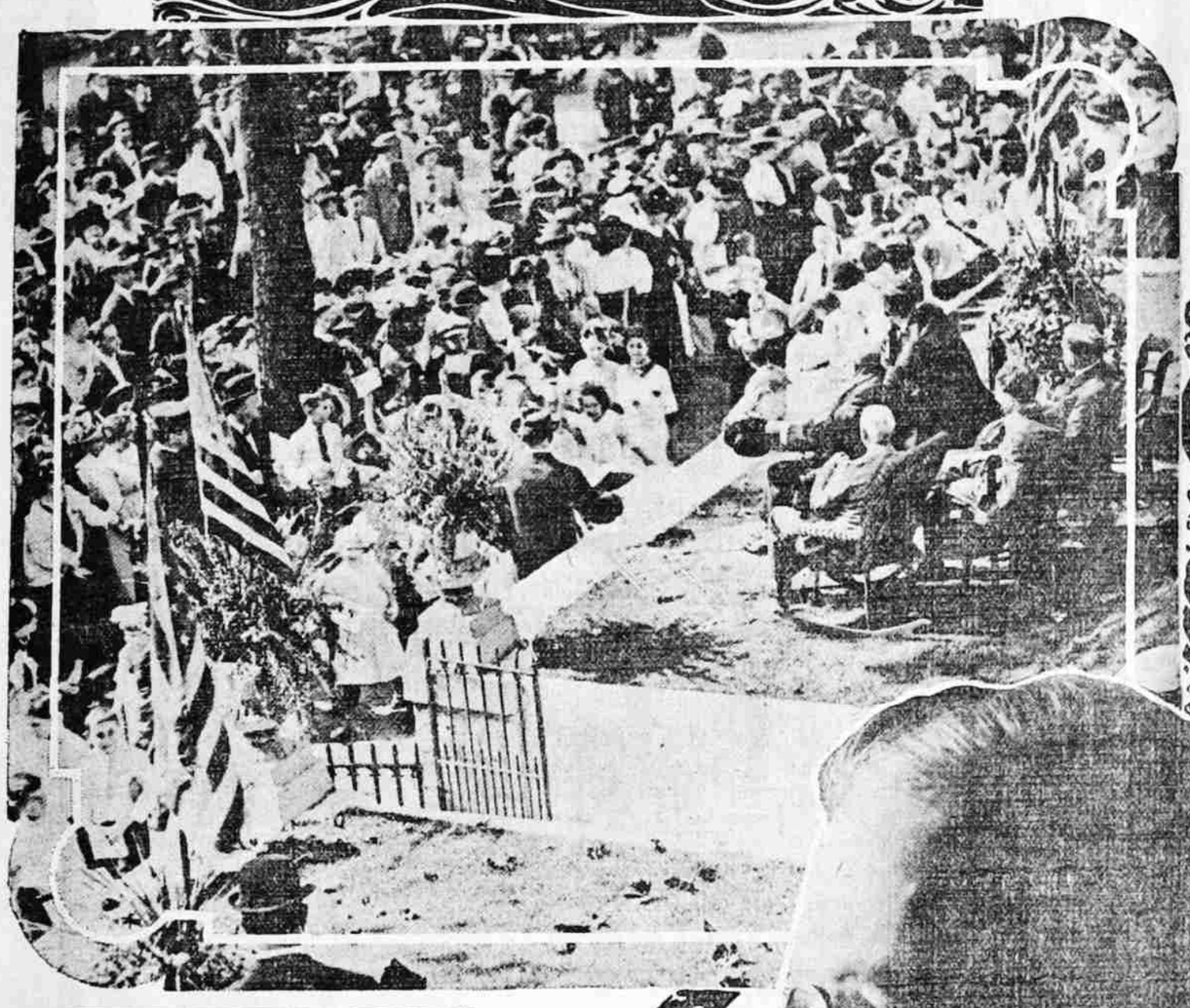
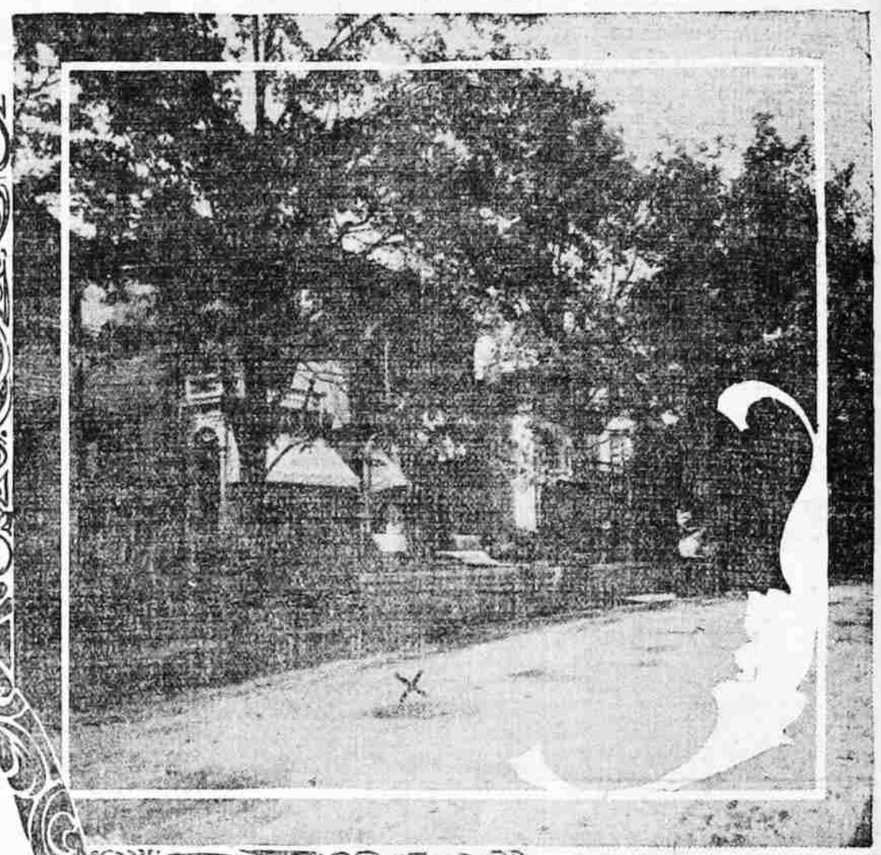
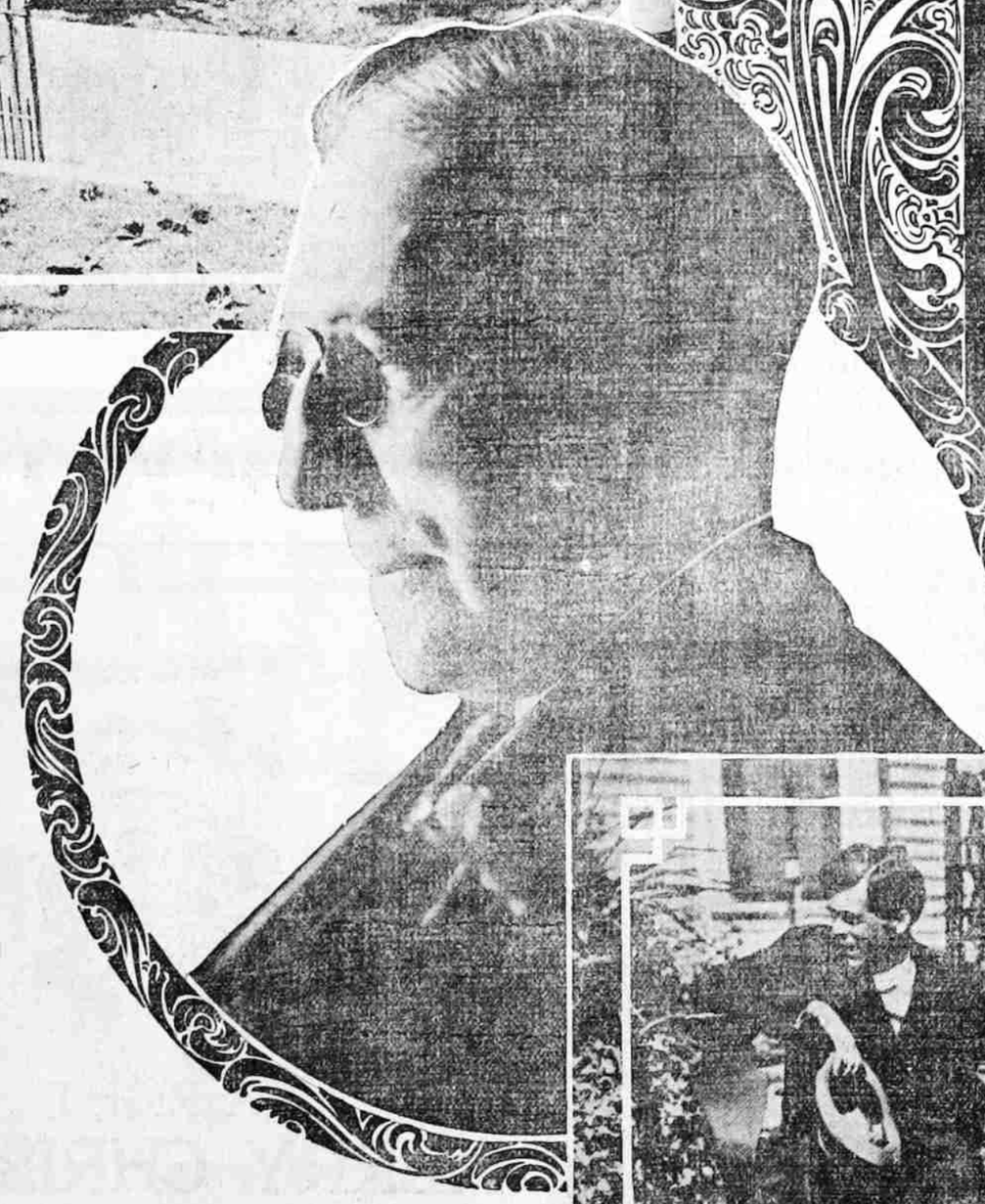
# JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

# THE CHILDREN'S POET

## How the Glad-Faced Little Tots Swarmed on His Natal Anniversary and Prompted Him to Pen Four Charming Lines to Their Future Welfare.







Upper left shows the Riley ceremonies; upper right shows Riley's home in Lockerbie street; James Whitcomb Riley in center. Lower picture shows Riley among a group of literary friends. Riley portrait copyright by Mecca, Indianapolis.

Called by a thousand-fold chorus of children's blessings, James Whitcomb Riley, on his last birthday, turned back from the valley of the shadow of death to beam upon the little ones whom he loved, and sang, with a smile of his old tenderness and whimsical fun. From the ashes of his wrecked health flashed a gleam of the ancient raillery and affection. It was perhaps the last flicker of his genius. For the Hoosier poet lay paralyzed, his "native wood-notes wild" silenced forever, at his home in Indianapolis.

It was fitting that the children, whose endless delight he is, should cheer his darkening days with their united homage. The idea of doing him organized honor arose in the Indiana Federation of Women's Clubs, which adopted a resolution at its meeting last year suggesting that a day be set aside as "Riley Day." The proposal was approved by the public instruction authorities of the poet's native State, and instructions were issued that, on his birthday, all the schools of Indiana should join in appropriate exercises.

It happens that the real date of Riley's birth is unknown. As to the year, 1849, 1852 and 1853 have been guessed. The day of the month is said to be October 7, but the poet has always waved aside waggishly all inquiries concerning his age. His friends say that he was profoundly touched by the State-wide ceremony in his honor, but in a message to the school children of his home city, Riley half-disguised his emotion behind a jest at his own reticence as to his age. He wrote gaily:

"To the School Children of Indianapolis:

"You are conspirators—every one of you, that's what you are—you have conspired to inform the general public of my birthday, and I am already so old that I want to forget all about it.

"But I will be magnanimous and forgive you, for I know that your intent is really friendly, and to have such friends as you are makes me—don't care how old I am! In fact, it makes me so glad and happy that I feel as absolutely young and spry as a very schoolboy—even as one of you—and to all intents I am.

"Therefore, let me be with you throughout the long, lovely day and share in your mingled joys and blessings with your parents and your teachers, and in the words of little Tim Cratchit: 'God bless us, every one.'

"Ever gratefully and faithfully, your old friend,

"JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY."

Dictating this message from his "mattress grave"—for Riley could no longer use his hands to guide a pen—the poet was again one with Tiny Tim, Dickens' lovable boy in the "Christmas Carol." Years ago, in the spirit of "Suffer little children to come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," Riley sang:

"God bless us every one," prayed
Tiny Tim,
Crippled and dwarfed of body, yet
so tall
Of soul, we tip-toed earth to look on
him,
High towering over all."

Outside of Indianapolis, where every high and grade school witnessed a program of Riley's works, the most enthusiastic celebration was held in the town of Greenfield, where he was born. The principal speaker was Almon Keefer, who set type for the Hancock Democrat half a century and who put into type Riley's earliest poems as the youth stood beside the case, eagerly awaiting the proof.

In a Greenfield attic was resurrected an example of Riley's handiwork as a sign painter, which was the trade he adopted after rebelling from the routine of his father's law office. It was made for A. J. Banks and long decorated the Banks Building. Several years ago it was taken down and stored in a loft. But in honor of the day it was replaced in front of the building. The words, "J. W. Riley," in small script, are in the lower right hand corner.

It was perhaps out of disrespect for his own name that the embryo bard inscribed it upon a sign board. He is reported to have often lamented: "How can anyone be a poet with such a name as J. W. Riley?" He overcame this handicap later by writing his name in full—a device upon which he once rallied John Clark Ridpath in a poem, asserting that the famous historian was in boyhood "J. C. Ridpath," in youth "J. Clark Ridpath," and in his day of fame "John Clark Ridpath, set, Plum at the dashboard, of the whole-endurin' Alfabet"—in playful reference to his victim's row of honorary degrees.

Concerning Riley's age, several of the Indianapolis teachers who made investigations said that "old settlers" relate he was born in 1849, and was therefore 62 years old at his last birthday. "Who's Who in America" gives the year as 1853. Another authority gives 1852 and another, more cautious, says "about 1852." W. W. Pfrimmer, one of Riley's old friends, is quoted as saying of him in a book published some years ago: "Should you ask him his age, he would say that he is 'This side of 40,' and leave you guess as to the side."

Although the author of poems in the purest English, which may be compared with the works of Poe, Keats and Coleridge, Riley is best known under the noble title of "the children's poet." In treating of their lives, he touches every note in the gamut of childish emotions, from the poignant pathos of "There, little girl, don't cry," and the humor of "The Spoiled Child," to the juvenile awe of the supernatural in "Little Orphant Annie."

It is not so well known that he also treated the child-character in prose, in short stories of indubitable grip at the heart strings, such as the narrative of "Jamesy," the grimy, tricksome bootblack and gamin, with his drunken father and dying sister; or the story of Tod Anderson's fascination at the glory of his first circus.

"The Raggedy Man" is one of Riley's favorites among children, and runs:

"O, the Raggedy Man! He works for pa;
An' he's the goodest man ever you saw!
He comes to our house every day,
An' waters the horses, an' feeds 'em hay;
An' he opens the shed—an' we all laugh
When he drives out our little old wobble-ly calf;
An' nen—ef our hired girl says he can—
He milks the cow fer 'Lizabuth Ann.
Ain't he a awful good Raggedy Man?
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!

W'y, the Raggedy Man—he's ist so good,
He splits the kindlin' an' chops the wood;
And then he spades in our garden, too,
An' does most things 'at boys can't do—
He clumbed clean up in our big tree
An' shooked a apple down fer me—
An' another 'n', too, fer 'Lizabuth Ann—
An' another 'n', too, fer 'Lizabuth Man.
Ain't he a awful kind Raggedy Man?
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!

An' the Raggedy Man, he knows most rhymes,
An' tells 'em, ef I be good, sometimes:
Knows 'bout Giunts, an' Griffuns, an' Elves,
An' the Squidicum-Squees, 'at swallers the'rselves!
An' wite by the pump in our pasture lot,
He showed me the hole 'at the Wunks is got,
'At lives 'way deep in the ground, an' can
Turn into me, er 'Lizabuth Ann!
Ain't he a funny old Raggedy Man?
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!

The Raggedy Man—one time, when he
Wuz makin' a little bow-'n orry fer me,
Says, "When you're big like your pa is,
Air you go' to keep a fine store like his—
An' be a rich merchunt—an' wear fine clothes?
Er what air you go' to be, goodness knows?"
An' nen he laughed at 'Lizabuth Ann,
An' I says, "'M go' to be a Raggedy Man!
I'm ist go' to be a nice Raggedy Man!"
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!

As simply sad as Eugene Field's "Little Boy Blue" is Riley's "A Life-Lesson," in which he probes the depths of emotion as deeply as did his greater Missouri contemporary:

There, little girl, don't cry!
They have broken your doll, I know;
And your tea set blue,
And your playhouse, too,
Are things of the long ago;
But childish troubles will soon pass by—
There, little girl, don't cry!

There, little girl, don't cry!
They have broken your slate, I know;
And the rainbow gleams
Of your youthful dreams
Are things of the long ago;
But heaven holds all for which you sigh.
There, little girl, don't cry!

There, little girl, don't cry!
They have broken your heart, I know;
And the rainbow gleams
Of your youthful dreams
Are things of the long ago;
But heaven holds all for which you sigh.
There, little girl, don't cry!

Having enshrined children in his verses, Riley desired, before his death, to leave them another pledge of his love. By his will he left real estate at Indianapolis worth $75,000 to the School Board, on which to erect a public library and an administration building for the public instruction officials. Many a child of the future, with his or her mind awakened by a freely loaned book or by improved efficiency in the schools, will thank the poet for his beneficence as well as for "Knee-Deep in June."